

C O N F I D E N T I A L MADRID 000679

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PTER PREL SP

SUBJECT: SPANISH ELECTIONS: CONCERNS ABOUT AN ETA ATTACK

Classified By: Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Polcouns, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Spanish police are concerned that ETA may strike in the period before the March 14 national elections. Juan Hidalgo, Senior Advisor to the State Secretary for Security, told us February 26 that ETA's recent announcement of a "cease-fire" in Catalonia meant that it might seek to strike elsewhere in Spain during the electoral campaign to show that the Catalonia cease-fire matters. Senior Popular Party (PP) contacts, including an official from the Ministry of Public Administration and a campaign strategist, expressed similar concerns. They said that ETA seeks to inject itself into electoral campaign and would like to strike to show that it is still operational.

¶2. (C) Hidalgo confirmed that ETA is in poor operational shape. The arrests of 126 ETA members and collaborators in Spain in 2003, combined with dozens of high level arrests in France had dealt major blows. Members of ETA's operation terrorist cells now have an active period of only months before they are caught, Hidalgo said. This is causing consternation in ETA's ranks. Hidalgo said that unlike in the past, new ETA recruits are often little more than street criminals, who are prone to mistakes. Despite all this, Hidalgo underlined that ETA still maintains the capacity to strike. It only takes one functioning cell to plant bombs or conduct an assassination. Hidalgo said police had been able to foil attacks, such as suitcase bombs on Spanish trains on December 24, which might have proven very bloody ) but this could not go on indefinitely.

¶3. (C) Hidalgo spends considerable time coordinating ETA matters with French police. He confirmed that cooperation with the French is at a high level. This cooperation had been improving steadily since the mid 1990s and has gotten better since 9-11. Hidalgo confirmed that that Mikel Antza and Josu Ternera (fugitive Batasuna member of Basque regional parliament) are the political heads of ETA. He said there are differing views on who the overall ETA "military command" leader is. It is difficult to know for sure, he said, given the arrests over the past year in France of top operational leaders. Hidalgo could not confirm that it was Antza and Ternera (rather than other ETA reps) who met with Catalan nationalist ERC leader Carod-Rovira in early January in France, as has been widely reported.

¶4. (C) Hidalgo did not believe that ETA, as its operational capacities decline further, would opt for ever bloodier and more indiscriminate attacks (as some predict). Hidalgo felt that with over 500 ETA prisoners in Spanish jails, ETA would want to keep the possibility open of, under terms of surrender, getting GOS agreement to move ETA prisoners to prisons in the Basque region so they could be near their families. (The ETA prisoners are currently scattered throughout Spain as a security measure).

¶5. (C) Comment: The Popular Party and its candidate, Mariano Rajoy (a former Interior Minister), have made GOS success in the fight against ETA a central issue. An ETA attack, even a serious one, however, would not necessarily harm Rajoy and the PP in the elections, as it could underscore the need for a continued firm hand against ETA. ETA's primary goal, rather than influencing the election outcome, would appear to be to use an attack during the high-profile finale of the national election to demonstrate that, despite the police